

## **'Mit und Gegen' by Wassily Kandinsky: The Two Levels of an Artwork**

### **Introduction**

In his essay 'Beauty' (2003), Nick Zangwill presents a number of issues and distinctions in the field of aesthetics. This essay focuses on the distinction that was delineated by Kant between *free* and *dependent* beauty. Zangwill explains it as follows:

'The free beauty of a thing is independent of its history (and indeed of its future), whereas a thing's dependent beauty depends on its history in so far as that history enters into its function.' (Zangwill, p.8)

In short, by free beauty he means the beauty of the object in itself, while by dependent beauty he intends the teleological beauty, that is linked to its purpose. Zangwill proceeds in his analysis by presenting his 'primacy conjecture'. According to him, free beauty is at the basis of the possibility of an aesthetic experience: it is only when we are able to appreciate the free beauty of some entity that we can appreciate the dependent one.

This essay proposes a modified distinction between free and dependent beauty. It claims the necessity to widen the definition of *dependent beauty* by including also *intellectual beauty* - by which I mean the beauty that arises from acquiring knowledge about the 'history' of the object in consideration. Further, it evaluates the validity of the 'primacy conjecture', reflecting on the role of imagination in each of the two levels of beauty defined by Kant.

It takes as a case study the artwork *Mit und Gegen*<sup>1</sup> ('For and Against') by Wassily Kandinsky,



Picture 1: *Mit und Gegen*. Retrieved from "MOST POPULAR PAINTINGS." *Mit Und Gegen*, 1929 by Wassily Kandinsky, [www.wassily-kandinsky.org/Mit-und-Gegen.jsp#](http://www.wassily-kandinsky.org/Mit-und-Gegen.jsp#).

Kandinsky, painted in 1929 during his Bauhaus period (from "MOST POPULAR PAINTINGS"). The painting is analysed in context of this distinction and offers the basis for the extension of

the definition.

In this analysis, the paper employs claims and arguments from Zangwill<sup>2</sup>, Hutcheson<sup>3</sup>, Hume<sup>4</sup> and the concept of imagination<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> page MOST POPULAR PAINTINGS from [www.wassily-kandinsky.org](http://www.wassily-kandinsky.org)

<sup>2</sup> Beauty, 2003

<sup>3</sup> The Idea of Beauty: Francis Hutcheson, Inquiry concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design: , 2008

<sup>4</sup> Of the Standard of Taste, 1965

<sup>5</sup> Mostly from Imagination & Creativity in Sartre, 2001

## The choice of the painting

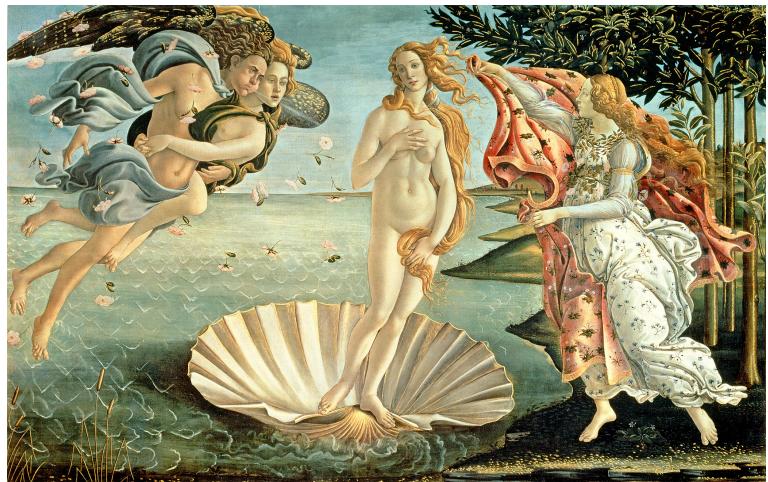
I have chosen this painting because it is my favourite painting. It is, therefore, certainly an object I find beautiful, but it is also interesting to consider for many other reasons. Firstly, Kandinsky developed a well-rounded theory of visual aesthetics during the period of his life (1919 - 1931) when he was a lecturer of the preliminary course on art at the Bauhaus<sup>6</sup> (from “Vasilij Vasil'evič Kandinskij”). This allows the paper to take into account also the point of view of the painter himself.

Furthermore, this painting is an instance of Kandinsky's abstract art, genre in which the relationship between free and dependent beauty is stretched almost to the point of complete separation. To

understand what I mean by this, let us take into account the figurative painting *Birth of Venus* by Botticelli (Picture 2).

The free beauty of this painting is situated, among others, in the masterly depiction of the delicacy of the Venus, in the oculated positioning of the subjects in the pictorial space, in the pastel colours

employed... Its dependent beauty is the story this painting intends to narrate: Venus has come into the world from a shell in the sea and is transported by it to the shore, she looks splendid and her mane is softly blown by two loving winds, symbol of fertility; on the shore a maiden is in the act of covering her with a beautiful fabric (from “Nascita Di Venere”). The two levels of beauty stand in a figurative and symbolic relationship: for instance, Venus standing on a shell in the sea represents her birth from the sea on a shell. Differently, in abstract art, this one-to-one relationship disappears and the free beauty merely evokes, or triggers, the dependent one.



Picture 2: The Birth of Venus. Retrieved from  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/0/0b/Sandro\\_Botticelli\\_-\\_La\\_nascita\\_di\\_Venere\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project\\_-\\_edited.jpg/400px-Sandro\\_Botticelli\\_-\\_La\\_nascita\\_di\\_Venere\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project\\_-\\_edited.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/0/0b/Sandro_Botticelli_-_La_nascita_di_Venere_-_Google_Art_Project_-_edited.jpg/400px-Sandro_Botticelli_-_La_nascita_di_Venere_-_Google_Art_Project_-_edited.jpg)

<sup>6</sup> public school of architecture and applied arts founded by Walter Gropius in 1919

## The free beauty of the painting

The free beauty of *Mit und Gegen* arises from the calculated disposition of shapes and colours (from “**MOST POPULAR PAINTINGS**”). The background is an uneven and vivid red, that, according to Kandinsky’s studies, produces in the observer a sense of pain but also vitality and energy (from “*Vasilij Vasil’evič Kandinskij*”). The power of this colour is balanced by the harmony between the shapes in the left part and the ones on the right. If on the left side there are fewer shapes, these are the ones containing more colour, so they are, in a sense, ‘heavier’. The preponderance of black in the bottom part of the painting is unloaded by the use of bended lines, which favour happiness and the elevation of feelings (from “*Vasilij Vasil’evič Kandinskij*”).

Here we can see how Kandinsky’s studies on optics and pleasure seem to endorse Hutcheson’s analysis<sup>7</sup> on which features excite ideas of beauty. In fact, Hutcheson believes that these features are *uniformity amidst variety* (Hutcheson, p.108). To show this endorsement, let us consider only the left side of the painting (Picture 3):

I believe the reader would agree that the beauty of this part is lower than that of the entire painting. This phenomenon can be explained through Hutcheson’s theory: beauty is diminished because the object possesses less variety - fewer shapes and colours - and also a lower uniformity - as both the moon-like shape and the blue and yellow shapes are no longer matched by their mirrored version in the right side of the painting. In this sense, Hutcheson’s concept of *absolute beauty*<sup>8</sup> is in accordance with Kant’s free beauty.



Picture 3: Left Half of Picture 1

## The dependent beauty of the painting

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Hutcheson’s theory is compatible with Kandinsky’s also on an ontological level: according to the philosopher, beauty is an *internal sense* which is triggered by our external senses but is completely independent from them; seemingly, for Kandinsky the principle of art is an *inner necessity*, the ‘principle of efficient contact of the form with the human soul’. So we can see how, in both views, this capacity is located inside of us, but it arises from the interaction subject-object.

<sup>8</sup> We will see how the distinction made by Hutcheson between *absolute beauty* and *relative beauty* does not fully coincide with Kant’s, notwithstanding, his idea of absolute beauty overlaps almost perfectly by Kant’s free beauty.

To understand the dependent beauty of this artwork one ought to be aware of Kandinsky's life<sup>9</sup>: the painter was born in Moscow but lived most of his adult life in Germany, where artistic avantgardes were proliferating (from "MOST POPULAR PAINTINGS"). In this sense, the two shapes in the painting could be representative of the ships that brought Kandinsky from Russia to his new life. The ship on the left is smaller but more stable (it is held by a bottom-facing moon) while the second is more majestic, yet sustained by a highly unstable triangle. In this sense, the smaller ship symbolizes the secure pathway that can only yield moderate results, whilst the bigger boat stands for a troubled road that could lead to great things.

As it is evident from this explanation, there are multiple factors that contribute to the dependent beauty of the painting. In the first place, (1) we can trace a representational and symbolic purpose: the two ships suggest the two possible roads of life. In addition, (2) the painting seems to be expressive of Kandinsky's feelings about the abandonment of his motherland. Finally, (3) one cannot help but take into account the role of Kandinsky as the 'founder of abstract art', which makes us project the genius of the painter onto the painting.

It becomes clear how Kant's decision to include in the dependent beauty only its purpose/intention is restricting - only the first point falls into this definition. Hutcheson's consideration of *relative beauty*, which he defines as follows:

'Comparative or relative beauty is that which we perceive in objects commonly considered as imitations or resemblances of something else' (p.108)

opens the door to involuntary representational purposes that are excluded in Kant's teleological view. However, it still excludes all the factors that are not caused by the message the artist conveys, but that still increase the aesthetic value of the painting. To this purpose it is helpful to ponder Hume's view of the ideal critic. In his aesthetics, an ideal critic must hold the following characteristics: (1) delicacy of imagination/taste, (2) practice and familiarity, (3) ability to compare, (4) freedom from prejudice, (5) good sense (Hume, pp. 1-15).

When we consider point 2 and 3, it becomes clear how Hume was the only one of the three to imply that the beauty of the painting must be seen *in context*. He holds that it is impossible to judge on the beauty of an item 'objectively' when one is not

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<sup>9</sup> As a disclaimer, I could not find any expert analysis on this painting, therefore all the descriptions are my conjectures based on various notions about his life and style

acquainted with other objects that fall into the same category or with objects that could serve as a basis for comparison. I believe that this consideration finally takes into account *intellectual beauty* of the painting. To explain this, let us consider, superficially, a practical application of knowledge by comparison and practice: the field of art history. An avant-garde painter is judged by an art historian primarily on two grounds: whether the artist initiated a new trend in art and how well the artist fitted inside a pre-existing trend. From the first ground, it is clear that the beauty of Kandinsky's work benefits from its position in art history and for this reason intellectual beauty ought to be included in dependent beauty.

### Imagination or belief

Let us come to the final issue of this essay: does the 'primacy conjecture' hold for this renewed definition of free and dependent beauty?

I believe that the 'primacy conjecture' holds under any definition of this distinction and that is due to its link to imagination. To show this, the paper adopts the definition of imagination:

'an image is a more or less vague thought of Mary's [example], which does not intrinsically require confrontation with anything real outside of itself, and cannot be experienced by others' (Perna, p.3)

Similarly to imagination, but with the addition of a claim to truth, the following is the definition in the Merriam-Webster of *belief*:

'a state or habit of mind in which trust or confidence is placed in some person or thing' (from "Belief")

According to these definitions, only the level of free beauty creates an image of the painting, since the dependent level, I hold, creates a belief. I will explain this point through a religious example, but the same applies to all paintings. When one first looks at Giotto's painting (Picture 4), the mind focuses on a number of elements and the general composition. Through this, the person creates an



Picture 4: Majesty of Ognissanti.  
Retrieved from: "Maestà Di Ognissanti."  
Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation,  
[it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maest%C3%A0\\_di\\_Ognissanti#/media/File:GiottoMadonna.jpg](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maest%C3%A0_di_Ognissanti#/media/File:GiottoMadonna.jpg).

image of the painting in their own mind that does not have the assumption of being real. When one is confronted with the representational meaning of the art piece, in this case the Virgin Mary with Christ, our image is shaped by the urgency to be fitting to the story, so it is transformed into a belief, intended as an image in which the person posits 'trust' of its truthfulness. Given that the creation of the image happens solely in the first level, the former is required for a human to evaluate on the aesthetic value of an art work.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, this paper has shown how the Kantian concept of dependent beauty ought to be expanded, yet leaving intact the 'primacy conjecture' that Kangwill based on the distinction. Nevertheless, there are some issues that were overlooked by the paper but that need to be addressed in future essays: Is it not then intellectual beauty just merely an intellectual pleasure rather than an aesthetic value (as Hutcheson and Zangwill would argue)? Is imagination linked merely to free beauty or also, in some way, to dependent beauty?

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